Hokkaido Winter 7 days: Lake Akan to Shiretoko

Introduction

Hokkaido is the second-largest of Japan’s main islands, long regarded as a remote wilderness with abundant nature. Known in feudal times as Ezo, Hokkaido was originally inhabited only by the indigenous Ainu people. Today, other than attracting nature lovers, Hokkaido in winter is a pristine paradise for bird watchers, with snow capped mountain ranges, serene forests and indescribably beautiful crater lakes produced by volcanic activity.

Our Hokkaido winter adventure offers a wonderful journey from Kushiro on Hokkaido’s eastern Pacific coast, passing through Akan-Mashu National Park and taking in Lake Akan, Lake Mashu, Lake Kussharo, Mount Io and its sulphur rocks. It continues through to the Shiretoko Peninsula stretching out into the Sea of Okhotsk. See untouched nature in the deepest months of winter when the region is covered in snow, visit UNESCO heritage nature reserves, experience spectacular winter landscapes formed by volcanoes and enjoy winter nature unique to Hokkaido.

There is the chance to spot abundant wildlife during a magical guided snowshoe experience – watch out for sika deer, the ezo red fox, ezo-risu squirrels and numerous species of birds. At each of the inns where you stay overnight you can enjoy relaxing in Onsen hot springs, a delightful by-product of the region’s geothermal activity. Another highlight of the tour is Hokkaido’s wonderful regional cuisine, some of the freshest in Japan, with local specialties found at every stage of your journey.

The fishing port of Kushiro is famous for some of the best seafood in Japan and home to a unique fishing culture which invented the Robatayaki open-grill style of cooking. From Kushiro visit the iconic Japanese red-crowned cranes, and continue to Lake Akan, home to the largest remaining Ainu community in Hokkaido. Here you witness a traditional Ainu dance performance. There is chance to visit Lake Mashu, one of the clearest lakes in the world, Lake Kussharo which in the Hokkaido winter becomes home to a large number of migratory whooper swans, and finally the Onsen spa town of Utoro on the Sea of Okhotsk along the Shiretoko Peninsula. While on Shiretoko Peninsula, experience a unique guided snowshoe walk through primeval forest, with a breathtaking glimpse of a frozen...
waterfall. If conditions permit, you may have the chance to walk on the seasonal drift-ice - the region's rich biodiversity begins with the floating ice from Russia, which arrives each winter. Shiretoko is the very end of Japan and is a remote area of truly untouched nature.

With optional and flexible snow activities, this Hokkaido winter adventure is perfect for couples looking for a unique getaway, for families, budding photographers and those looking for an active and varied winter experience.

DETAILS

TOUR LENGTH AND PRICES
7 days
Please see the website for the prices we offer in each currency.

TYPE AND LEVEL OF TRIP
This trip features leisurely walking, along with optional snowshoeing.

SEASON
Recommended from January until March.

WHAT’S INCLUDED
6 nights accommodation (1 hotel and 5 Japanese-style Onsen inns); 6 breakfasts and 5 dinners; Pre-bookable transfers and train tickets where required; Tickets to an indigenous Ainu traditional dance performance; Snowshoe walking experience in Shiretoko with a fully-trained local instructor; Detailed day-by-day itinerary and local support by telephone.

ITINERARY

Day 1 > Arrive in Kushiro
Arrive into Kushiro Airport and travel to central Kushiro by the handy connecting shuttle bus for your first evening on Hokkaido island. Kushiro is an ideal location from which to begin your exploration of Eastern Hokkaido.

Kushiro airport (KUH) has regular domestic flights from various points in Japan including Tokyo’s Haneda airport and Sapporo’s New Chitose airport.

Depending on your arrival time, there may be opportunity to explore Kushiro town and enjoy local cuisine, such as fresh seafood at one of Kushiro’s signature “Robatayaki” grill restaurants.

Accommodation: Western-style Hotel

DAY 2 > See Red-Crowned Cranes and travel to Akan Onsen
This morning visit a nature reserve to view wild red-crowned “Tancho” cranes in a picturesque winter setting, and a local museum nearby to learn more about the biology of these majestic birds. The elegant cranes are known for their expressive courtship dance which makes for a captivating sight. Their pure white feathers are also said to reflect different hues in the glistening sunlight.

In the afternoon, travel onward to Akan-Mashu National Park - one of six National Parks in Hokkaido and home to the largest settlement of indigenous Ainu people.

Arrive at your Onsen accommodation for the evening. Head out after dinner at your lodging to witness an ancient Ainu ritual dance and music performance, learning about the precious culture of Hokkaido’s indigenous inhabitants. Traditional Ainu dancing has been registered as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Accommodation: Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn) or Hotel in Akan Onsen

DAY 3 > A day exploring around Akan Onsen
This morning explore the Akanko Ainu Kotan Village area and visit the nearby Akankohan Eco-museum Center (open daily except Tuesdays). Here you can gain a deeper understanding of Akkan’s landmark volcanoes Mount Oakan and Mount Meakan, Lake Akan and Lake Onneto, together with the “Bokke” bubbling mud area.

Return to your Onsen accommodation for a second night.
For those seeking a more active outdoor winter experience, we can pre-book an optional half-day of guided snowshoe walking around the National Park - round-trip transportation, snowshoes and walking poles are all included in a supplementary charge.

On the guided snowshoe walk, choose a route to nearby Mount Hakuto look-out with panoramic views over Mount Oakan, Mount Meakan and Lake Akan. Or opt for a walk through the pristine and serene forested area surrounding frozen Junsai-numa pond. There is a good chance to spot various species of wildlife on both options.

**Accommodation:** Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn) or Hotel in Akan Onsen

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**DAY 4 ➤ Visit Lake Mashu, Mount Io, and Lake Kussharo**

Head onward from Akan Onsen by pre-booked private transfer towards the eastern part of Akan-Mashu National Park and on to Kawayu Onsen where you spend the night.

Take in the grand views of Lake Mashu - a crater lake famed for its crystal-clear water within the caldera of an ancient volcano - some of the most stunning vistas in all of Hokkaido.

Next marvel at the iconic yellow sulphur rocks at Mount Io, an active volcano with plumes of sulphur emanating from over 1,500 fumaroles covering its slopes.

From here travel onward to see the numerous migrant whooper swans at Lake Kussharo and its thermal waters.

Known as ‘Seseki-petsu’ or ‘hot river flowing through the village’ in the traditional Ainu language, Kawayu Onsen features some of the most famous geothermal waters of Hokkaido and indeed in the whole of Japan.

Stay overnight at a traditional Onsen Ryokan inn in the small town of Kawayu Onsen.

**Accommodation:** Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn) in Kawayu Onsen

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**DAY 5 ➤ Travel to Utoro Onsen on the UNESCO-certified Shiretoko Peninsula**

In the morning you continue northwards by local train and bus, taking in stunning views of the Sea of Okhotsk enroute to Utoro Onsen. Travel along the Shiretoko Peninsula, one of Japan’s most remote regions and home to a very special ecosystem year-round. ‘Shiretoko’ derives its name from the ancient Ainu words “Sir Etok”, which means the “end of the land”. From late January through to March, floating drift-ice from Siberia can be seen along the coast. The peninsula is also a bird watcher’s paradise with over 256 species spotted during the year, and in winter months the endangered Steller’s sea eagles may be glimpsed.

Later in the day take the opportunity to visit the Shiretoko World Heritage Centre to learn more about the region. If the weather is kind, see the dramatic Oronkoiwa rock formation along the nearby coastline.

Using local lodgings with wonderful Onsen thermal baths and delicious regional cuisine, this is a perfect location to explore the wider region.

**Accommodation:** Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn) in Utoro Onsen

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**DAY 6 ➤ Explore Shiretoko with a local guide, with optional snowshoe walking**

Today enjoy a day of “Active” guided snowshoe walking around Shiretoko National Park
through primeval forest to the frozen Frepe waterfall, with panoramic views of the surrounding Shiretoko mountain range and over the expansive Sea of Okhotsk. There is a good chance of seeing various wildlife such as Hokkaido’s sika deer, ezo red fox, ezo-risu squirrels and white-tailed or Steller’s sea eagles. Round-trip transportation from your accommodation, snowshoes and walking poles are provided for the walk of around 6km which takes about five and a half hours. No previous experience is necessary to enjoy the snowshoe walk.

From February to late March, it is possible to undertake a specialized guided snowshoe walk to the pristine snow-covered Shiretoko Five lakes with dramatic views of the surrounding mountains and Sea of Okhotsk, including the option to walk on drift-ice along the Shiretoko coast.

Spend one final night at your Onsen accommodation before flying out of Memanbetsu Airport tomorrow.

**Accommodation:** Onsen Ryokan (Hot-spring Travellers Inn) in Utoro Onsen

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**DAY 7 > Tour ends with departure from Hokkaido**

After breakfast at your lodging, travel by bus and local train onwards to Abashiri, arriving in the early afternoon. If departing on an evening flight, you may wish to visit the Museum of Northern People in Abashiri to learn more about the Ainu and other tribes inhabiting the northern territories. With a history stretching back over 2,000 years to the time of their arrival in Hokkaido from Siberia, the Ainu are indigenous to Japan and Russia.

From Abashiri a 30-minute local bus journey brings you to nearby Memanbetsu Airport for your flight from Hokkaido and the end of your tour.

Memanbetsu airport offers connecting flights to Sapporo, Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka.